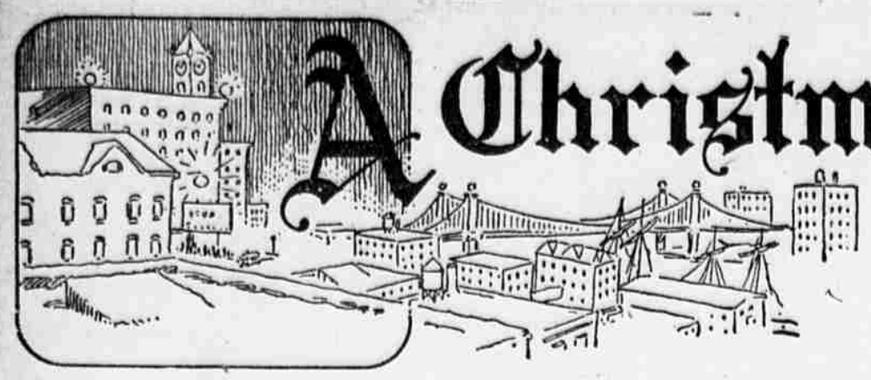
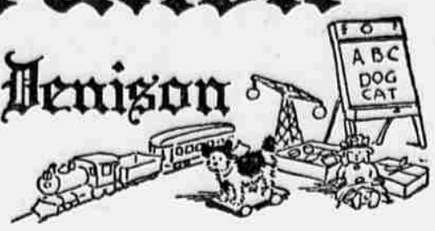


A Christmas Regeneration

By Lindsay Denison



ALONG about two thousand years ago a Little Child came into this world through a stable. Probably stables weren't very clean and sweet two thousand years ago—not nearly as nice as they are today. But the things that Little Child brought to the world were so dear and beautiful and good that most of us have come into the way of thinking that his memory and ever-living presence and influence are exclusively the property and the privileges of the righteous, of those who abide in ways and places which are clean.

But it is nevertheless true that the soft tug of the Little Child's baby hands is felt today by folks who are not very nice and who live in places far more deplorable than ever was that Nazarene stable. Wherefore:

Cowles and Roberts watched the waiter set down the glasses and turn away. Then they laughed, each at the other, but without gladness.

"Bobs," said Cowles, "you don't seem to yearn for your medicine."

"No, Charley," sneered Roberts, "and I don't observe an absorbent haste on your part. What do you suppose is the matter with us?"

"We're 'fraid, Bobs," said Cowles. "That's what's the matter with us. We're 'fraid. 'Fraid of starting in. You've seen the kids on that slide thing down at Luna park. They hunch themselves along toward the start and then hang there until somebody from behind pushes them off. That's the way I feel. I'm waiting for somebody to come along from behind and give me a start. 'Cause I know, just as those kids know, that I am going to get bumped, and scraped, maybe, good and plenty before I reach bottom."

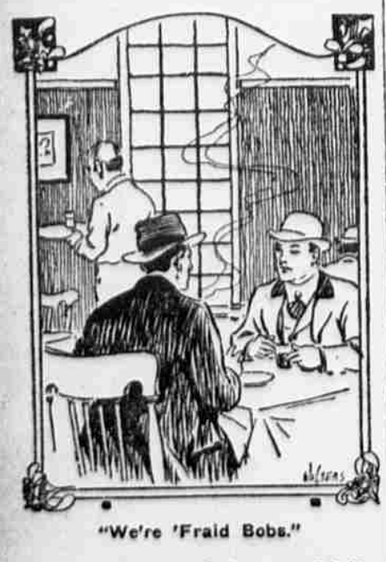
"Right!" said Roberts. "That's just the way I feel, too." He looked around the room critically. "And as yet nobody seems at all inclined to start us along on the descent. What's the matter with the old place, Charley? Here it is half past nine o'clock, Christmas eve, and there are less than twenty people here—and all of them cross. What are you looking at?"

"There's a bronze-haired, brazen-faced little person sitting right back of you, Bobs—don't turn; she's looking right at you. I've seen her before. I ought to know who she is. But I can't remember for the life of me."

"One of those 'Where-have-I-seen-that-face-before' situations?" Roberts cautiously looked obliquely into the mirror and studied the woman's face.

"I'll bet you know her, too," retorted Cowles. "She is probably the lady cashier who used to smile across her desk at us languishingly when she gave us our change for our beef and beans—before you got plutocratic and married and shook all your friends. By the way, how is the family? This is a lovely joint for a six-months' bridegroom to be in on Christmas eve. But I've been so long watching you young men, 'reformed by marriage'—beg your pardon, old man!" he cried, as he looked away from the hauntingly reminiscent face of the woman opposite and caught the hurt look of his friend. "What's the matter? You're not having any trouble at home, are you? You haven't been scrapping with Rose?"

"Why do you think I'd ask you to meet me at a joint like this, tonight of all nights, if there wasn't trouble with Rose?" growled Roberts. "I'm



"We're 'Fraid Bobs."

not fit to be married to a girl like Rose, or any girl, anyway, Charley, and I—" his voice broke a little; he caught himself and went on. "Let's drop it, Charley!"

They both stared at the table, for a moment.

"Bobs," said Cowles, after awhile, speaking slowly and low, "you can kick me for being fresh, if you like. I know it's none of my business. But I like you too much not to tell you that I hate to see you starting out on a tear because you've got a grouch on your wife. Now, I'm hopeless and my grouch isn't with anybody I care a hoot about, anyway. But you Bobs—"

"Drop it, Charley! Drop it!" Roberts laughed bitterly. "Let us proceed with that stirring melodrama which I suppose you would call 'The Souse's Christmas Eve.'" He glanced again at the girl whose face he could see in the mirror. "I know who she is, Charley," he said. "The girl opposite you, I mean. Do you remember Sadie Cargill? The girl who sang 'Coraline' and 'If You Wouldn't—Then I Would;' at the Casino about five years ago? Don't you remember that everybody was crazy about her?"

Cowles looked up cautiously.

"Sure!" he said. "That's who she is. But what in the world is she in this place for? Sadie Cargill in Big Jimmy's! Whew, what a come-down!"

"I seem to remember somebody was saying the other day that she had gone pretty well to pieces," said Roberts. "Didn't take care of herself. Whoever it was said he had seen her in the chorus of a fly-by-night musical

Studied the Woman's Face.

comedy out Kansas City way and that she seemed to have hit bottom."

"Yes," said Cowles, studying the girl's face, "it is Sadie, all right. She seems to have kept all her good looks, too, except that her face has hardened terribly. Don't you remember what a soft-cheeked, innocent, merry little thing she always was?"

Roberts nodded and looked again into the mirror. He shook his head at what he saw. "Yes," he murmured, "she was. And now, before you recognized her, you called her 'bronze-haired and brazen-faced,' and she is."

"I hope," spoke up the young woman, with startlingly distinct voice and with unlimited acidity of intonation, "that the next time you two see me, you'll remember me! Take a good look."

Both men sprang to their feet, snatching off their hats.

"I beg your pardon," said Roberts, earnestly, "but really I didn't realize that you could see from the mirror how I was staring at you. I'm awfully sorry and very much ashamed. Really I am—we both are."

Miss Cargill looked him over with approval and was obviously mollified.

"Oh, that's all right," she said, with a tired smile. "I'm sorry I barked at you that way. A woman is a good deal of a fool to make a kick when a man looks at her in Big Jimmy's. But I'm sore on the world tonight and kind of cranky. Come on over here, both of you. Perhaps you can talk me out of it."

Cowles and Roberts looked at each other and laughed. And because Sadie, despite the hardening, was undeniably charming with the old graciousness of the Casino days, they carried their glasses to her table. Cowles smiled as they set them down, still full, beside hers.

"We were afraid, too," he explained.

"You in trouble, too?" She sighed. "Well, I'm used to it. Better tell your old auntie your poor little sorrows. Maybe I really can do you some good." She turned to Roberts. "First off, what's biting you?"

Cowles interrupted precipitately.

"Let me tell mine," he urged. "I'm the worst case. I've just lost my job. I'm a newspaper man and I've never been noted for my saving disposition."

Miss Cargill nodded with a smile which seemed reminiscent. Almost involuntarily she hitched her chair over a little closer to Cowles. The instinct of the stage lady to cuddle up to the youth who may some time "get her name in the papers" is as imperishable as the instinct of self-preservation.

"Well," continued Cowles, "my rent comes due in a week. Also all the bills. Also it is the Merry Yule Tide when the young blood gets square with all the nice girls who have been especially nice to him. And I've been canned! Fired! Lost my job! And by the latest count I have on my person just thirteen dollars and forty cents good and lawful coin of the United States and nothing more coming to me. That's all."

Roberts took up the story.

"No, it isn't all, Miss Cargill—I beg your pardon," he cried as he saw her wince.

"It's all right," she said wearily. "Don't bother. It's all right. I haven't used that name for some time and I kind of hoped nobody would remember it. Fact, I'd rather like you boys to call me that tonight. Christmas eve's kind of different. Go on."

"Charley didn't tell you how he lost his place. He lost it because he took the blame for a bad break made by another man—the other man had a flock of kids, and Charley wouldn't see their Christmas spoiled—that's why!"

"Nice boy," she said softly. "Nice boy!" And then, after a moment: "And, anyway, this is the first job you ever lost, isn't it? Thought so. It's nothing when you get used to it. I know." Her voice was even; but her foot was tapping the floor under the table. "It's when you get used to it, and think you can always get another and one day find that nobody will believe you when you say that you're going to steady down and be good—that's what hurts. This time next year you'll be laughing at yourself for feeling down."

"No, I won't!" growled Cowles. "I've done my best for three good years and I've been decent when I didn't have to be decent and I've been straight with myself and the game. It don't pay. I'm going to cut loose now and take things as they come."

Miss Cargill studied the ugly blaze in his eye intently and shook her head. The hard lines in her face became more rigid.

Cowles reached for his glass. She stopped him.

"No," she said, "let's all start even. I want to know your friend's troubles."

"Never mind about mine," said Roberts, looking away from them both. He was almost, but not quite, surly. Cowles shook his head at her surreptitiously.

"Don't be afraid," she murmured. "I won't make any breaks. And he needs help more than you do." She turned to Roberts again. "Married?" she asked him.

"How did you know that?" he asked, his face still turned away.

"Oh, I knew," she said.

"Well?" he said.

"You've been having trouble at home?"

Roberts nodded.

"Tell me! What about?" She leaned across the table toward him, speaking very softly with misty eyes. Roberts did not raise his head.

"Christmas presents," he said.

She drew back her head and laughed, just three or four pearly notes and then became grave again—sincerely grave.

"Now, see here," Roberts blurted out, looking straight into the woman's pitying eyes. "I am going to tell you about it. I know it isn't decent. But I haven't told anybody and I know I'm right—anyway, more right than she is!—and you've been up against things a lot—and I want to tell you about it."

"That's right," she whispered as gently as though she had been petting a curly head at her knee.

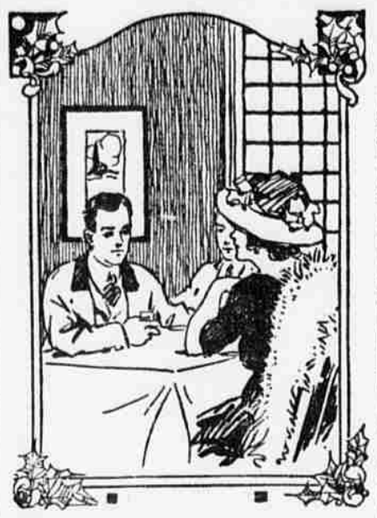
"Well," he recited in a monotone, "she asked me to meet her at Tiffany's today and I did. And she picked out a ring and I told her I couldn't come within five hundred dollars of paying for it unless—unless I broke my promise to increase my brother's college allowance. And she was hurt and then she was angry and she said things. You don't know—but there was a man—a rich man—an old man—over in Brooklyn and—when she first met me she had almost made up her mind to marry him. Anyway—she said things and I said things and both of us were nasty—and bitter. This was all going uptown in a cab. And when we got to the door she said she wasn't going to get out—that she was going back to her own people in Brooklyn—and I said I didn't care. And I don't!" His voice broke, even on the defiant note. "But it hurts. . . . and don't you think I was right?"

Cowles was staring at him somewhere between amazement and amusement.

"And is that all?" he began, "that—"

"Stop!" Miss Cargill said to him sternly. "It's enough! Let me tell you two something. Now this isn't to print." She looked at Cowles. He nodded, that simple nod of the genuine American reporter which is worth all the gold bonds of Wall street. "It never got out why I left the Casino. But it was because I was married on the quiet." She looked up and saw the waiter standing near. She plucked a pencil from Cowles's waistcoat, tore the margin from a newspaper sticking out of his pocket and wrote a name on it.

"Married to him," she said, showing the slip to Roberts and Cowles in turn. Cowles whistled in astonish-



"Charley Didn't Tell You How He Lost His Place."

ment. Roberts stared at the paper with dimmed eyes; they cleared and he looked up quickly. "It didn't get out," she explained, "because I really cared. I didn't want any press agent foolishness about him. Besides, I was going to quit the business, anyway. I did, all right, all right!" She laughed sourly and went on. "He was just out of college, and I was a lot younger than I am now and different—I was sort of different from anybody around the Casino, I guess." Her voice caught, but she tossed her head and continued: "And that made him like me. And I liked him and we were married and went away. But as soon as he came to know me better he found (what I'd known all along) I wasn't up to his family standard. He knew he would have to tell them about our being married, and that when the time came and they looked me over I wouldn't exactly stack up with his people—manners, you know, and when to do things and how to do them and the sort of people I liked. And he tried to tell me. And I got mad—and we came back on different boats. And if I'd told him how much I wanted to learn to be the way he wanted me—if he'd told me that he wanted me to try—why then—why then it would have been just one of those funny little married tiffs. But I was mad. I said I didn't care. Not even when they came and took my baby. I didn't care. I've never cared.

"Well, that was just a starter. And after the very first, I didn't care any more. Something broke and all the care dropped away from me. You've got your troubles of where to eat and sleep and drink," she said to Cowles. "And you've got a heart that's pretty near to breaking—and maybe will," she said to Roberts. "But as for me, I've had all those troubles for years and I haven't cared. Because I haven't any heart." Her eyes began to shine and her eyelashes became wet suddenly. "At least I thought I didn't, until today.

"I live about twenty blocks uptown. You know what these New York flats are. And in the flat under me there's some respectable married people, with a baby. A little girl about five. And she's been sick. And I guess the father hasn't had a job in a long time. Anyway, the other day I saw him taking a china clock under his coat—it looked like a wedding present—and I guess people don't hock their wedding presents until pretty near the last. And the floors are so thin you can hear everything that goes on down there. And the baby—anyway, the little girl began asking two weeks ago about a Christmas tree. And yesterday they told her that Santa Claus was getting snobbish nowadays and wasn't interested in poor people—or poor people's little girls—not even when they were sick. And she cried all day. She was crying when I came out last night. She was still crying when I got home this morning. She's cried all day today. And I'm broke. I've only got ten dollars between me and the river. And my rent's two weeks overdue and I've got to pay that before I quit, because the landlord's been dead white to me. And I've never cared before for four years, but—I care now—I care—I can't help it. I do. I do."

She dropped her hands to the table and her head on them. She sobbed; they were long, dry, heartbreaking sobs.

"Don't cry, Miss Cargill," urged Cowles, patting her shoulder clumsily. "Don't cry—Sadie!" She jerked away from under his hand and cried on.

"Miss Cargill," said Roberts, leaning over toward her and speaking very softly, "you have been very kind to both of us. Will you let us be kind to you. Please stop crying. Please! And then try to tell me just how much money you need."

She lifted her head and glared at him.

"What good will money do that poor baby when she wakes up tomorrow morning and finds—" She gritted her teeth and reached for her worn and rusty gloves and then for the long untouched glass.

"Wait!" cried Cowles in a tone that made them all start. His voice fairly rang. "Wait, wait, wait!" he repeated, pulling out his watch and looking at it. They were both staring at him curiously.

"It's Christmas Eve," he said. "The stores are open until midnight! It's only a little after ten o'clock. Come on for a cab and Eighth avenue! Here's where we knock the eye out of one set of troubles!"

The fat little proprietor of the Eighth Avenue Five and Ten Cent Emporium was galvanized from weary somnambulance into new life when two young men and a very fluffy (even though a bit shabby) young woman leaped out of a cab to his counters. He bounced around and scolded his clerks into a state of thorough irritation. But their work-sick wrath gave way to curiosity and then hilarity as the three customers went laughing, quarreling and consulting, up and down the disheveled counters. The fat proprietor went down into the cellar and came up with an armful of pasteboard packing cases in which two clerks especially detailed laid away each toy as it was singled out. There were dolls and tin railroad trains and whirligig things and rattles and stuffed rabbits and woolly dogs that squeaked, and more dolls and building blocks and flying machines and Noah's arks and little stoves and doll's furniture and more dolls—to say nothing of candelholders and silvered angels and shiny balls.

"Time! Call the game a minute!" cried Cowles. "Let's count up. How much have we bought?"

The fat proprietor, exuding greasy appreciation, made figures on a pad. "Fifteen dollars and thirty-six cents," and with a burst of generosity, added: "I'll throw off the six cents."

Roberts laughed, but Cowles was serious.

"Bobs," he said, "I'm afraid we've gone far enough. Half of fifteen is about as far as I really ought to go."

"But where," insisted Miss Cargill, gently shouldering between them, "do I come in?"

She thrust a five-dollar bill into Roberts' hand.

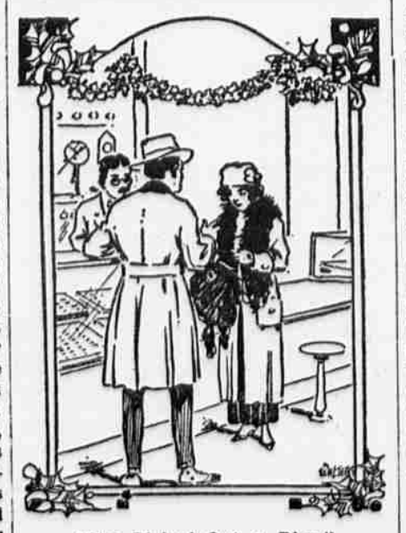
"No," said both of them in a breath. She flushed, and in the next breath they both cried: "Why, yes, of course."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

In a hansom laden with bundles and a Christmas tree cut away from the sidewalk decorations of the Emporium, Miss Cargill and Cowles departed northward. Roberts couldn't go because there wasn't room after the Christmas tree had been put in.

"I'll meet you," he called to them, "at Big Jim—no, not there. At the little drug store on the corner above. Merry Christmas to the kid."

It was nearly twelve when Cowles alighted at the drug store and met the



"She Picked Out a Ring."

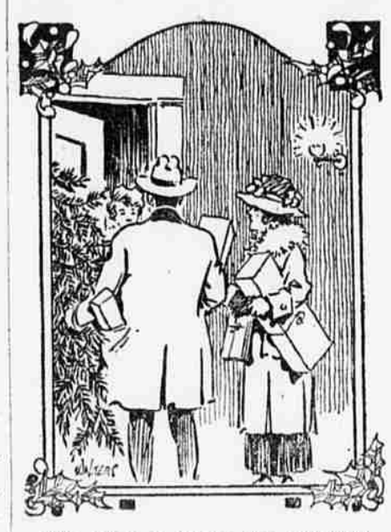
eager Roberts in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Tell me about it," demanded Roberts. "How was it?"

Cowles' eyes were brimming.

"We had to wake the family up in the flat below," he said. "At first they were sleepy and kind of mad. Thought we were patronizing them. But Sadie was so everlastingly tactful and sweet . . . . pretty soon they began to cry, and I thought we'd never get the darned old tree up, for the mother's hugging her. Say, it was the grandest looking tree since the Garden of Eden. Honest! . . . And when it was all fixed, the folks wanted to go in and wake up the baby and bring it out, and light up, and let Sadie see the fun . . . Sadie wouldn't have it. She laughed a little . . . said she didn't believe in Christmas Eve trees, morning was the time to have 'em. I didn't laugh. Couldn't . . . I saw her face and it 'most broke my heart. . . . Then they asked her to come down in the morning; she said she couldn't. Said she was going away on a long journey before morning—oh, no, Bobs, it's all right; she may have meant to kill herself—I think she did—but she won't now; it's all right. Wait till I tell you. And we walked up to her flat . . . Oh, I forgot to say, that on the way uptown she got to crying like a little girl because she didn't have any dolly of her own, and I bought her one; horrible thing; painted china face and most as big as she was . . . we walked up to her flat; she had the doll in her arms with her head down on it. I lighted the gas. She walked into her bedroom . . . laid the doll under the cover with its head on the pillow and threw herself down beside it.

"I started to say something and she lifted her head and told me to get out and the quicker the better . . . then she fell down beside the doll again and began to cry. I never heard



"We Had to Wake the Family."

anybody cry like that. I went out to the door and rattled the handle . . . sneaked back to her door again, because I didn't dare leave her—you know—after the way she had been feeling and talking. She had cried herself to sleep with her arm out across that doll. . . . So I turned the lights out and came away."

"What are we going to do now?" said Roberts after a while.

"I tell you what we're going to do," said Cowles. "You and I are going down to the Metropole and get hold of Ted Tonwill and make him give Sadie Cargill a chance—a good chance—in his new show. He'll do it if we ask him, both of us together. And she will keep steady and make good. And we'll send her a telegram about it so she will get it first thing in the morning, before she gets to thinking any more about 'long journeys.'"

"Good! Of course that's what we'll do," cried Roberts. "Only let's hurry. Because I am going over to Brooklyn to get Rose and tell her what a cad I know I am. And" (not without the hurry of embarrassment), "I don't want to wake her father up any later than is necessary."

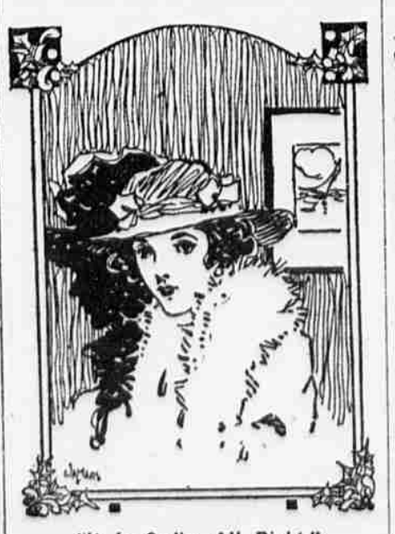
Cowles reached out and took his hand and gripped it, saying not a word. They turned toward the Metropole. In twenty steps Roberts stopped short and pulled Cowles under a street lamp.

"But look here, Charley," he said, "what are you going to do? We've fixed Miss Cargill up all right. And, bless her, she has fixed me up. But I don't see that either of us has done anything for you."

"You have done just this," said Charley, a little unsteadily. "Instead of taking to the rosy and thorny path of graft, I'm going over to the station to get the one o'clock train for Statonville where I've got an aunt who has been begging me to come up over Christmas. And when I've got a little rested and my nerves steadied down, I'm going to take a night desk on the Planet that's been offered me, only I was soured on the game. But, Bobs—"

Through a break in the roar of the city's night came the far-off tinkle of chimes ringing in the Christmas morn. Cowles looked up at the sky. So did Roberts. The sky was dark, all but for a single star twinkling through the flying clouds, over the dome of the Grand Central station. They looked at each other and then, because they both saw things in their faces that wouldn't quite bear looking at, turned their eyes away and walked on.

"But, Bobs," continued Cowles softly after a while, "this has always been a day for beginning things over again, rather. . . . And it wasn't I who helped—or you—or even Sadie Cargill. It was—a Little Child."



"It Is Sadie, All Right."